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INFO RUEHDM/AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS 3849
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 3715
RUEHTV/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV 1506
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 4249
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
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C O N F I D E N T I A L BEIRUT 001299

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/10/2029
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SUBJECT: LEBANESE PRESIDENT SLEIMAN'S VISIT TO WASHINGTON

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Thomas F. Daughton for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: President Michel Sleiman and his delegation look forward to their discussions with President Obama and other U.S. officials during their December 12-16 visit to Washington. President Sleiman -- who will be accompanied by Defense Minister Elias El Murr, Foreign Minister Ali Al Chami, Minister of State Wael Abou Faour, and Presidential Advisors Naji Abi Assi and Nazem Khoury -- is eager to discuss Lebanon's recently formed government, his priority of maintaining stability in Lebanon, and Lebanon's commitment to fulfill its obligations under UNSCR 1701. Sleiman is also keenly interested in U.S. engagements in the Arab world, including with Lebanon's neighbor Syria, as well as an update on Middle East peace negotiations. Sleiman will arrive in the U.S. as a representative of Lebanese national unity just days after the passage of a parliamentary vote of confidence for a new government. He will argue that Lebanon is actively engaged in finding solutions to sensitive domestic issues, such as creating a national defense strategy (code for controlling Hizballah's arms), and in boosting Lebanon's profile on the international scene through its representation on the UN Security Council beginning in 2010. President Sleiman will seek assurances that the U.S. remains committed to assist Lebanon, that U.S. regional engagements will not be at Lebanon's expense, and that Middle East peace will not lead to the forced permanent resettlement of Palestinian refugees on Lebanese territory. End Summary.

WHAT SLEIMAN REPRESENTS

¶2. (C) President Sleiman was elected as a "consensus" president on May 25, 2008, after a protracted political stalemate. His election was controversial because immediately prior to his election he was the commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). Some in Lebanese political circles opposed the idea of a military officer becoming president without at least a mandated "cooling-off period" between military service and political life. Others pointed to his rise through the ranks during the long years of Syrian occupation and questioned his impartiality. However, Sleiman committed himself to represent all of the Lebanese people and to strive for unity among Lebanon's sectarian groups, and has so far been generally successful in doing so.

¶3. (C) Since taking office, Sleiman's most important objective has been to maintain stability in the country. Naji Abi Assi, Director General of the Presidency, reiterated to Charge December 9 that Sleiman represents general political consensus -- including not only Prime Minister Saad Hariri's majority coalition but also the opposition that includes Hizballah -- and not only his personal convictions. Abi Assi characterized Sleiman as "moderate, modern, and a

friend of the West," but described protecting stability in Lebanon as his absolute priority. The challenge for Sleiman during his visit to Washington, Abi Assi said, is to strike the right "balance" so that the visit is viewed as positive by both the GOL and the U.S. administration, and will not stir tensions in Lebanon.

SLEIMAN'S TOOLKIT: NATIONAL DIALOGUE AND THE UNSC

¶4. (C) By the time President Obama meets with President Sleiman on December 14, we expect the new Lebanese cabinet to have received a parliamentary vote of confidence, more than six months after national elections. The long cabinet formation process has underscored the strict limits placed by the Lebanese constitution on the role of the president in the day-to-day affairs of the government, as well as the limits of his ability to affect politics. Sleiman's primary means to influence domestic affairs in the coming months is the National Dialogue, which he will compose and chair. The National Dialogue process brings a representative grouping of Lebanon's senior political leaders together to discuss -- and, ideally, agree to solutions for -- the most sensitive issues of the state. This latest round of the National Dialogue is expected to focus on a "national defense strategy," a euphemism for dealing with Hizballah's weapons. The National Dialogue will also become the likely venue for any negotiations about the concept of "deconfessionalism," the abolishment of sectarian quotas in public life.

¶5. (C) Internationally, Sleiman has publicly stated his intention to use Lebanon's non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council beginning in 2010 to raise Lebanon's standing in the region and beyond. Sleiman and his advisors appear unconcerned that issues raised by the Security Council -- particularly with respect to UNSCR 1701, Iran, and other contentious resolutions on the Middle East -- will create untoward domestic tensions for Lebanon. On the contrary, Sleiman argues that Lebanon's representation on the Council validates Lebanon's desire to be "at the table, rather than on the table." Lebanon's consensual democracy and confessional diversity are positive images to promote and project in a region historically wrought with tensions, they posit. Sleiman and the GOL also publicly and privately state their commitment to fulfilling Lebanon's obligations under 1701 and support its full implementation, although progress remains slow.

BUT STILL RELYING ON THE HELP OF OTHERS

¶6. (C) Neither President Sleiman nor the GOL assumes that Lebanon will be able to achieve its goals for security, stability and economic growth without foreign assistance, especially from the United States. Given Sleiman's priority to maintain stability -- and his long military career -- he and Defense Minister Murr are looking forward to discussing U.S. military assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces. Sleiman shares our belief that building and developing state institutions like the national army is crucial if Lebanon is to eliminate the reliance of its citizens on non-state actors. In light of Sleiman's constrained ability to effect domestic political change, he will also focus on obtaining U.S. assurances on transnational issues of key concern to Lebanese across confessions: that U.S. engagement in the region (and especially with Syria) will not come at the expense of Lebanon; and that a Middle East peace settlement will not mandate the forced resettlement or naturalization of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon.

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